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SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

... What They Are
... How They Work
... How SCS Helps Them

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Soil Conservation Service

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The soil conservation district is a central source of help and information about soil and water conservation in nearly every community in the United States.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (SCS) channels most of its on-the-land technical assistance to rural land owners and operators through soil conservation districts. Various other USDA conservation programs are carried out in cooperation with soil conservation districts. Most Federal and State conservation agencies and many private organizations and groups make their services available to these local districts.

As a consequence, a rural land owner or operator can get conservation information and assistance tailored to the needs of his own land by applying to the local district office.

Soil conservation districts also are a means for coordinated community efforts in soil and water conservation. They sponsor or cosponsor most watershed protection and flood prevention projects and resource conservation and development projects. By virtue of their broad activities, districts have an important role in the development of rural areas.

- What are these local soil conservation districts?
- How do the Soil Conservation Service and other Federal agencies work through them to carry forward a national program of soil and water conservation?
- How can you, as a land owner or operator, make use of the district's services on your own land and participate in a community-wide conservation and development program?
- How can a community, through its soil conservation district, protect and develop its soil and water resources?

The following pages attempt to answer these questions. For more detailed information, consult the soil conservation district office or an SCS conservationist in your local community.

SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

... What They Are ... : How They Work

... How SCS Helps Them

SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS blanket the Nation. They include about 99 percent of the farms and ranches and more than 95 percent of the agricultural land in the United States.

Each district has a conservation program to fit its local problems. It uses a combination of local, State, and Federal services to put its own program into effect on individual farms and ranches and in community-wide projects.

The first districts were organized in 1937. Experience in the nearly 30 years since then demonstrates that soil conservation districts are an effective means for both individuals and communities to deal with local soil and water problems.

UNITS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Soil conservation districts are legally constituted units or instrumentalities of State Government created to administer soil and water conservation work within their boundaries **They are not branches or agencies of any Federal Department.**

Each district is self-governed. It has authority to enter into working agreements with other governmental agencies and with private concerns to carry out its purposes.

Through such working agreements with the individual districts, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and other agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provide assistance to rural land owners and operators, watershed associations, and others.

Legal Basis

Each district is created by legal procedures under authority of State law.

These laws differ in different States, but they have much in common. All are based on the principle that local land owners and operators should take the initiative and responsibility in directing conservation programs aimed at solving local soil and water problems.

In many States the law has been amended to permit adding the words "and water" to the name of a district, making it soil and water conservation district.

Amendments in some States provide for a nonfarm member on the district governing body or for close working relationships between districts and urban or urban-fringe planning groups.

In most States, each district is created after petition, public hearings, and a referendum show that land owners and operators want such a local agency to deal with their conservation problems.

Once established, a soil conservation district is legally responsible for soil and water conservation within its territory, much as a county is responsible for roads or a school district for education.

Local Control

Each soil conservation district is directed by a board of local people, usually resident land owners or operators, elected or locally designated. In most States, members of this governing board are called supervisors, but in some directors or commissioners.

This board of supervisors (directors or commissioners) decides upon a districtwide program and plan of action. It then arranges for assistance from public or private sources to put its program into effect. It directs the use of this assistance to help land owners and operators further their individual conservation plans and to carry out community conservation activities.

A State soil conservation committee (board or commission) established by the State soil conservation law has general direction of district activities in each State. This body acts for the State Government in creating new districts. It consults with and advises district supervisors and facilitates their local operations. It manages the State funds made available for district operations.

District Program

Each district prepares a "district program." This document describes the conditions and the problems affecting land and water resources in the district. It states the district's soil and water conservation and development goals and tells what the district proposes to do to attain them.

The program is prepared by the supervisors after consulting with local citizens and considering technical information furnished by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, State agencies, and other sources.

ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE

The State laws authorize soil conservation districts to own property, to accept materials and services, and to use and manage them to further their conservation objectives. Most districts arrange for the services of public agencies and private organizations through formal working agreements, based on the district program.

In addition to the services arranged for through working agreements with public agencies and private organizations, many districts make other services and materials available to their cooperators. They may include special equipment to do large or unusual jobs; obtaining seed, planting stock, or fertilizer for resale; or scheduling contractors to do conservation work.

Working Agreements

The Soil Conservation Service provides technical assistance to soil conservation districts under the terms of formal agreements with each individual district.

Other agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture have their own working agreements with districts to suit their various functions and operating procedures. Many non-Federal agencies and organizations also contribute to district activities according to their separate arrangements, some formal and some informal.

All agencies of the USDA are authorized to assist each district with which it has a "basic memorandum of understanding." USDA enters into a basic memorandum with each district whose supervisors have (a) formally requested the assistance and (b) prepared a district program. This memorandum provides for the agencies in USDA to assist the district in carrying out the objectives of its program.

Each agency then examines the district program and determines the degree to which it can provide the requested assistance. It may enter into a supplemental agreement covering its specialized type of assistance.

The Soil Conservation Service has the major job of providing technical assistance to individual land owners and operators and groups in planning and doing

If You Are a Land Owner

THE ODDS ARE 9 to 1, if you are a land owner in a conservation district.

Whether you live on the land, in a conservation district can provide you with the knowledge to conserve the soil and water and the plants and animals.

If you operate rented or leased land as an owner.

Here are some of the services available in every district:

- A detailed soil and land-capability map of your site and range condition map of range
- Local and specific information about the land (including grasses, trees, and wildlife)
- Information about the conservation of the possible systems of use.
- Consultation service from a professional to develop a basic conservation plan for your land
- Technical services as needed to design terraces, or other structures you decide; seeding methods and rates, and cultural practices as planned; and to answer technical questions about lands, or wildlife, or in developing

In addition, many soil conservation districts have services and facilities to help them with special circumstances and the arrangements common are:

- Equipment for earthmoving, seeding, and planting with operator or for rent on a cost basis
- Planting stock of trees or shrubs.
- Scarce seeds and fertilizers at minimum cost
- Specialized technical assistance from specialists
- Technical assistance in developing

You can find out about these services at the local office, the Soil Conservation Service headquarters, the county committee in the county where your land is located, the county seat town and are listed in the directory of Government agencies.

If You Are a Land Owner or Operator

THE ODDS ARE 9 to 1, if you are a land owner, that your land is in a soil conservation district.

Whether you live on the land, in a nearby town, or far away in a city, your soil conservation district can provide you with many unique individual services to help you conserve the soil and water and the plant and wildlife resources on your land.

If you operate rented or leased land, in most districts you can get the same services as an owner.

Here are some of the services available from the Soil Conservation Service through every district:

- A detailed soil and land-capability map of your farm, ranch or other land; a range site and range condition map of rangeland.
- Local and specific information about the different safe uses and adapted crops (including grasses, trees, and wildlife) for each kind of soil on your land.
- Information about the conservation practices needed on each kind of soil with each of the possible systems of use.
- Consultation service from a professional soil conservationist to help you make a basic conservation plan for your land.
- Technical services as needed to design, lay out, and check the construction of dams, terraces, or other structures you decide to build; to decide on the varieties of plants, seeding methods and rates, and cultural practices to use in establishing grass or trees as planned; and to answer technical questions that arise in managing pastures, woodlands, or wildlife, or in developing income-producing recreation enterprises.

In addition, many soil conservation districts arrange for and offer cooperators other services and facilities to help them with their conservation work. These vary with local circumstances and the arrangements made by different districts. Some of the more common are:

- Equipment for earthmoving, seeding, or other unusual operations, usually for hire with operator or for rent on a cost basis.
- Planting stock of trees or shrubs.
- Scarce seeds and fertilizers at minimum cost.
- Specialized technical assistance from woodland- or wildlife-management agencies.
- Technical assistance in developing income-producing recreation enterprises.

You can find out about these services by inquiring at the soil conservation district office, the Soil Conservation Service headquarters, or the county agent or county ASC committee in the county where your land is located. These offices usually are in the county seat town and are listed in the telephone directory under county and U.S. Government agencies.

soil and water conservation. It has a "supplemental memorandum of understanding" with each district stating the kinds of services to be provided and the conditions under which they are to be used. Under this agreement, it provides without charge the services of professional conservationists to help plan and apply conservation measures. Usually it locates a work unit in each district to give direct assistance to supervisors and cooperating land owners and operators.

SCS agrees with the supervisors on a "schedule of assistance" specifying the technical personnel, office and transportation facilities, and other assistance to be furnished under the supplemental memorandum of understanding. The supervisors are consulted about any major change in this schedule.

The Forest Service has supplemental memorandums of understanding with certain districts, especially where national forest land is intermingled with private land that needs to be planned and treated concurrently.

The Farmers Home Administration makes loans to soil conservation districts to help them provide services for soil and water conservation. It makes loans direct to individuals to help them apply a conservation program. It also makes loans to individuals for income-producing recreation facilities carried out as part of a conservation plan.

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service through the ACP offers cost-sharing in the installation of certain conservation practices and directs its former committees to consult with the soil conservation district on the conservation problems of the county and especially on the work plans of the district.

It is USDA policy to invite district supervisors to participate with county ASC committees in developing county agricultural conservation programs.

The Federal Extension Service cooperates with land-grant colleges in furthering conservation education. The State and county extension organizations in turn make appropriate arrangements for assistance to soil conservation districts.

Soil conservation districts may have similar working arrangements with other Federal agencies outside USDA, with State agencies, with municipal or county governments, or with private organizations and groups. Many districts have commitments from a dozen or more government and private organizations to help further the objectives stated in the district program.

Cooperative Agreements

The soil conservation district enters into cooperative agreements with land owners and operators who wish to participate in the district's program.

The form of the agreement varies among States and districts, but in general:

(1) The land owner or operator agrees to prepare and follow a conservation plan for using his land within its capability and treating it according to its needs.

(2) The district agrees to provide a soil and land-capability map, information, technical assistance, and other services and materials as available and needed to help the cooperator carry out the plan.

Conservation Plan

Individual farm, ranch, and other soil and water conservation plans are the backbone of a soil and water conservation program. A plan gives a land owner or operator a picture of his soil and water resources, his land's conservation needs, and the soil and water management problems. It enables him to make needed land use changes and to install needed combinations of practices in an orderly manner.

A land user starts his conservation plan as soon as he becomes a district cooperator. He may proceed as rapidly or as slowly as he wishes.

The district provides him a map of his land, prepared by the Soil Conservation Service, showing the kinds of soil in each field and the capability of each for various uses. If he has rangeland, it shows the range sites and range conditions. The SCS conservationists assigned to the district give him information on the different ways each kind of land can be used and treated.

The cooperator decides what he will do with each acre of his land. The plan is put in writing and becomes a part of the cooperative agreement between the cooperator and the district.

Upon request, SCS conservationists help the cooperator do any of the planned conservation jobs that require knowledge or certain technical skills that he does not have. Such onsite help is given according to priorities established by the district.

The conservationists work on a continuing basis with the supervisors, and the cooperators maintain and improve conservation measures in the district.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Soil conservation districts are mechanisms that coordinate community activities in soil and water conservation and development. Where the district lacks legal authority or financial means to administer a project alone, it arranges with other local government subdivisions to assume specific responsibilities.

The soil conservation district, using help from Federal and State conservation agencies, is in a key position to provide the land treatment required as a part of every project.

SMALL WATERSHED PROJECTS

Soil conservation districts are the principal means for local administration of small watershed projects under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 566) and its amendments.

The Act authorizes the U.S. Department of Agriculture to assist local organizations with watershed protection and flood prevention projects on areas of no more than 250,000 acres. USDA can provide technical assistance, cost sharing, and credit. Local sponsors may include municipal and industrial water supply by paying the additional costs and may add recreation developments on a cost-sharing basis. The Soil Conservation Service has the primary responsibility for carrying out the Act.

Each project is initiated and administered by one or more local organizations. To qualify for Federal assistance, the local organizations must have authority under State law to carry out and maintain the needed works of improvement.

More than 95 percent of the projects authorized for Federal assistance are sponsored or cosponsored by districts.

Resource Conservation and Development Projects

Soil conservation districts sponsor or cosponsor resource conservation and development projects that are carried out under going USDA programs and new authorities given the Secretary of Agriculture in the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962.

The projects are designed to assist rural areas to speed up resource conservation and development in several-country areas to improve economic opportunities. They are locally initiated and administered projects that combine and coordinate resource con-

servation and development activities within the project area. The Soil Conservation Service administers the Federal part of the program.

FINANCES

Soil conservation district operations are financed by State and county appropriations, by money earned by the districts themselves, and by contributions from private sources.

Cooperators bear most of the cost of practices installed on their own land. The cost of certain practices of public benefit may be shared by the Federal Government through the agricultural conservation program, the Great Plains conservation program, and similar programs. Technical services are provided without charge by the Soil Conservation Service.

District supervisors serve without pay. Some are repaid from district funds for travel expenses incurred on district business.

State legislatures appropriate funds for the State soil conservation committees. Many States make funds available for allotment to districts for purchasing equipment and machinery, for hiring clerical and sub-professional help, and for other operating costs.

Counties and municipalities in many districts furnish additional funds for district operations.

The amount of State, local, and private funds, facilities, and services contributed to soil conservation districts is estimated at more than 40 percent of the Federal appropriation for assistance to districts.



Soil conservation districts established as of January 1968, and other conservation districts being assisted by the Soil Conservation Service.

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